

# Chinese Folktales

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China has more than five thousand years of history and a rich culture. Folktales are China's earliest literature. They existed even before written Chinese characters were invented. Folktales were passed down as oral stories from generation to generation.

Long after being written down, many folktales were so well known that they became proverbs. Proverbs are popular short sayings with teaching value. Some of these proverbs are just the title of a story with only a few words, easy to recite and easy to remember. Many of them are taught as lessons in schools. Students have to memorize them and recite them from memory. Because of this they are widely known by most Chinese. People often quote them in their conversation or writing.

How did folktales take form? In ancient China, common folk did not understand science, such as the workings of nature and the causes of disasters or weather changes. Thus, it became natural for them to imagine causes for everything that affected their lives. So they made up stories, expressing their frustrations and hoping their lives would be better.

The stories were beautiful and touching. They were entertaining and also had the important role of teaching values. People could learn from them in an interesting way. Even though some of them mixed immortals, spirits, and ghosts with mortal people, or combined history and mythology, the stories all stressed positive values.

There are several kinds of stories. Some reflect the real life of common people, and some depict heroic figures. Others represent historic figures. Some use animals to portray human traits to get the point across. Because folktales were originally oral stories, and people had different ways of telling them, sometimes the details vary, but the main story usually remains the same.

One common theme of Chinese folktales is *filial piety*. Filial piety means that it is the duty of the children to respect and obey their parents, and to take care of the parents when they grow older. This duty is very important to Chinese society. The stories also teach loyalty, justice, morality, and conscience. Since China was primarily an agricultural country, many of the folktales also emphasize hard work, persistence, and determination.

Because folktales were written over many centuries, they reflect different times and different areas of the lives of the Chinese. Thus, they have much historical value. They are entertaining and educational. That is why they have survived for so many years and have such an important role in Chinese culture.

Here is one example of a Chinese folktale:

### ***Wait Next to the Tree for the Rabbit***

*Long ago, there was a lazy rice farmer. One day after he had worked for a little while in the hot sun, he went to take a break underneath a shade tree not far from his rice paddies. While he was leaning against the tree trunk, closing his eyes to rest, suddenly he was disturbed by a loud thump! A rabbit had crashed into the tree on which he was resting. A wild animal had been chasing the rabbit, and the rabbit died from the impact with the tree. The farmer was thrilled at his unexpected fortune.*

*He picked up the rabbit and took it home, even though there was work for him in the rice paddies. He cleaned the rabbit and cooked the meat for supper. Then he took the rabbit skin to the market and sold it for a good price. The farmer was very happy. He thought to himself, “Hmm, if I can find a rabbit every day, I will not only have delicious rabbit meat to eat, I will also have more money than I can make working as a farmer in the hot sun!”*

*The next day, the lazy farmer didn’t work in his rice paddies. He sat under the same tree and waited for another rabbit to come. But no rabbit came crashing into the tree.*

*From then on, he waited under the tree every day. He completely ignored his farmwork. Eventually, his paddies grew full of weeds. When his friends finally talked him into going back to work, he was still full of hope, saying, “If I can get a rabbit every day, it is much more comfortable than working in the hot sun.”*

*In the end, he had nothing—neither a rabbit nor a grain of rice from his rice paddies.*

Although this story doesn’t lecture, when someone hears it or reads it, he or she will realize that one must work in order to reap the harvest.

Ching Yeung Russell is an award-winning author of books about her childhood in China: *First Apple*, *Water Ghost*, *Lichee Tree*, *Child Bride*, and *Moon Festival*.